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AUTHOR Marshall, John D.
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ABSTRACT

Evaluation and grading are individual and unique components of the formal learning/teaching process. Both acts embrace moral as well as ethical concerns which demand thorough, reflective attention. As teachers, we must admit to the subjectivity of both and use that subjectivity in a positive striving toward fairness. Our concern should be with the progress of individuals whom we can affect in a personal way. The final assignment of a grade then becomes little more than a legitimizing symbol. (Author)

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TEACHING'S MOST TAXING TRADITIONS:
REFLECTIONS ON EVALUATION AND GRADING

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John D. Marshall
The University of Texas at Austin

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ABSTRACT

Evaluation and grading are individual and unique components of the formal learning/teaching process. Both acts embrace moral as well as ethical concerns which demand thorough, reflective attention. As teachers, we must admit to the subjectivity of both and use that subjectivity in a positive striving toward *fairness*. Our concern should be with the progress of *individuals* whom we can affect in a personal way. The final assignment of a grade then becomes little more than a legitimizing symbol

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In all change, well looked into, the germinal good out-vails the
apparent ill. Francis Thompson

All educators experience an occasional need to reassess routine practices. Our perceptions change over time and usually without cognitive fanfare. And sometimes our perspectives shift as well. But the immediacy of these shifts makes them more critical and disturbing. During these latter times, we find ourselves confronting and reconsidering some of our most commonplace, "unthinkingly traditional" beliefs and activities. Recently, I found myself (once again) re-thinking my beliefs about evaluation and grading, two of my least favorite professional responsibilities. During these oftentimes poignant activities, I have had to assure myself that I knew what I was doing and why I was doing it. These ruminations have not always resulted in radically altered practices, but they have prompted me to make philosophical adjustments -- hopefully for the better. What follows is nothing more or less than my latest attempt at sort through teaching's most taxing traditions: evaluation and grading.

I see evaluation as the process of determining the merit or worth or value of something; or the product of that process. Grading is the act of assigning value within an ordered (usually small) set of labeled categories, the order corresponding to merit, e.g., A-F for letter grading.¹ Evaluation within the teaching profession has become a discipline² while grading remains but a widely accepted social convention.³ This distinction is crucial for those who would attempt to improve on either practice.

A grade is a terminal symbol; that is, we have come to understand it as a *product* of something which has been brought to an end. It is an historic mark,

symbolizing the completion of some (usually assigned) task. It is final. Evaluation, on the other hand, is a *process* which can provide information to both learner and teacher during their shared endeavor. While it may be an historic pause, so-to-speak, within a course of study, an evaluation's primary function is that of a guidepost used to make necessary alterations along the way. Simply put, a grade tells "how you did" while an evaluation tells "how you are doing."

When considering evaluation and grading, the notion of standards is always a concern. As teachers, we have standards which we attempt to communicate to our students with the hope that these standards will be met. It must be remembered, however, that we set these standards for a *collection* of persons who perform *individually*. Through the process of evaluation we can, if necessary, make individual adjustments regarding this collective standard. Both student and teacher receive a more precise and fair assessment of what is taking place in their educational encounter when a criterion-referenced approach to both evaluation and grading is incorporated.⁴ This permits us to realize that, just as we evaluate students as individuals, we can grade them as individuals too.

Acknowledgement of the importance of individual rather than group evaluation promotes the use of the numerous methods (what Burnham (1981, p.4) calls "tools") available for this task. Recently, as Fantini (1976, pp. 248-9) describes, alternative methods of evaluation have come into favor with many schoolers: periodic interviews, progress up-dates, related extra-school activities, and learning contracts are examples.⁵ In addition to the value these tools hold for teachers wishing to individualize evaluation, student exposure to such a variety of evaluative techniques can help them develop successful and accurate self-evaluation skills. Given that self-directed learning is a goal of

schooling⁶, the ability to develop one's own challenging standards and to ascertain one's own on-going efforts can indeed become a powerful asset to every individual (Sawin, 1969).

Evaluation and grading, even when undertaken individually, do seem to have certain unshakable problems. Perhaps the most "popular" of these is the question of subjectivity *vs* objectivity. The fear of bias can be a lingering one. While most students pay close attention to the tasks they are asked to perform, they are often more concerned with the *means* used to evaluate their efforts. As a result, great pains are taken by teachers to develop judgemental techniques which will be perceived by all as unbiased and objective.

However, scholars have argued convincingly that the conditions necessary for objectivity do not exist in the "real world" (Fairbairn, 1981, p. 3). Whether one's own biases can be eliminated from evaluation and grading is not the question of greatest concern: Perhaps we should admit and pay more attention to our subjectivity and use this awareness as a strength. As trained professionals and practiced, intelligent facilitators, we might utilize this understanding and awareness of subjectivity in redirected efforts toward *fairness* in our evaluation and grading practices.⁷ This would seem to be a much more realistic and reachable goal.

The grades we record become "public messages." Whether we have established high standards, whether our methods are thorough and just, and whether our philosophical bases are sound, clear, and deeply rooted -- these questions become far less important with the assignation of a grade, for a grade speaks to many who have little or no concern for such things. A grade is typically a comparative symbol placed in a variety of contexts for a variety of purposes, the most important of which is claimed to be communication. For

this to work, everyone involved would need to know *what* is being communicated, *to whom*, and for *what purposes*. But can we assume that our communication will not be misinterpreted? Can we be assured that the readers of these symbols will actually receive the messages wished sent? Are all grade-givers and grade-readers somehow "cosmically connected" so that *like* grades share *like* messages about course content, quality of work, student learning, standards of excellence, and so on? Can there actually be consistency between the grades assigned by different teachers or received at different institutions? Should we believe in some public universality of grading standards, or should we rest with our personal peace of having set our standards, examined our intentions, and decided not to agonize over if/how our grades (those we give as well as receive) relate to some imaginary, consistent, universal form of academic communication? *Upon deeper examination, the argument for grades as a necessary and meaningful form of communication becomes purely esoteric.*⁸

The act of grading contains still another issue: our power as the "givers of grades." Power, here, is the superiority, controlling influence or authority inherent in the act of grading. Assuming that the student agrees to perform within the parameters established by the teacher, a grade carries some legitimate meaning for them both. It is a simplified symbol representing performance in a specific course, recorded at an "acceptable" institution, and assigned by a credentialed professional. Ideally, it suggests the quality of effort put forth by the student in a learning role relative to the overseer's judgement of "excellence." It all (again, ideally) takes place within a situation providing for much student-teacher interaction and formative evaluation. Under these circumstances, *there will be no surprises in a recorded grade*. Ideally, then, the "power" of the instructor as grade-giver is simply

one of *legitimizing* the grade for the benefit of the student and the public.

A final important issue that accompanies the responsibility of providing feedback and terminal legitimization for a course of study is that of the "politics" of grading (defined here as entangling factional interests or underlying pressures). There are situations inherent in schooling that oftentimes seem to work at counter purposes to the achievement of meaningful evaluation and grading. An example of this is when one receives a "reminder" by one's superior that too large a percentage of high (or low) grades is being assigned. If this concern for so-called grade inflation (or deflation) results in grade adjustments which are not linked to evaluation adjustments (which would necessarily be connected to criterion adjustments), then the honesty, trust and fairness involved in both evaluation and grading becomes dangerously undermined. At what point do the trade-offs begin between our standards *vs* institutional survival and/or public imagery? These situations will become more common as the "excellence" bandwagon rolls on. Perhaps the politics of grading are inescapable; nevertheless, there must be ways of dealing with these sorts of political concerns which will allow the processes of evaluation and grading to maintain the credibility we assign to them.

Having worked through all of this, I am now more comfortably able to record this newest batch of grades. My thoughts offer no new answers and I have no elixir for sale -- just a hope that it all does some good in the end. I've concluded that evaluation and grading are individual and unique components of the formal learning/teaching process. Both acts embrace moral as well as ethical concerns which demand thorough, reflective attention. I can admit to the subjectivity of both acts and use that subjectivity in a positive striving toward *fairness*. My concern should be with the progress of *individuals*

rather than the shape of some grading curve. My on-going formative evaluations can allow each student continuous awareness of her/his progress and prevent any surprises in the giving/receiving of grades. When this works, I am simply *legitimizing* a public message (grade) sent by the student to those who might use it later. Through this process of on-going evaluation, students stand a much better chance of becoming capable of and practiced in self-evaluation.

I am more convinced than ever that those who believe in the value and integrity of the *shared learning experience* can help make meaningful, fair evaluation and grading a reality. And that's something worth thinking about!

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NOTES

1. Scriven, 1981, pp. 53;70.

2. According to Scriven (1981, p.i), "Evaluation is a new discipline though an old practice. It is not just a science, though there is a point to talking about scientific evaluation by contrast with unsystematic evaluation. *Disciplined evaluation* occurs in scholarly book reviews, the Socratic dialogs, social criticism and in the opinions handed down by appellate courts. Its characteristics are the drive for a determination of merit, worth or value; the control of bias; the emphasis on sound logic, factual foundations and comprehensive coverage."

3. Gregory (1972, pp. 16-17) writes that "grading is a social phenomenon with deep historic roots, the efficacy of which has long been disputed. Grades are labels applied in widely varying situations for a myriad of reasons to somehow describe human experience." Postman and Weingartner (1973, p. 23) also speak to the plasticity of grades: "Standardized tests, grading systems...report cards - these are all conventions which means that they can be, and have been, replaced by other procedures."

4. During an interview with the writer, Professor John Laska (The University of Texas at Austin) had this to say regarding evaluation and grading: "Criterion-referenced evaluation is applicable to all kinds of situations in which one can grade. There may be learning outcomes that we can't judge...so in those cases we might accept, simply, attendance in a course -- without any grading whether it's norm-reference or criterion-reference. But once you say you can *give* grades...then it's, I think, equally possible to give criterion-referenced grades."

5. "The ultimate criterion with respect to a grading system should be the student's education. Grades are means to the end of education, not ends in themselves. Thus, instructors should be free to experiment with methods of increasing their educational value, particularly helping students learn how to evaluate." (McKeachie, 1978, p. 186)

6. Ayers and Rohr (1982) found that both high and low achieving students are quite capable of predicting their level of performance before beginning many college-level classes. Thayer (1971) feels that college drop-outs may be realistically evaluating their own "incapacities."

7. Fairborn's (1981) piece contains nine conditions that are found in a fair evaluation. Gregory (1972), too, incorporates the notion of being fair into his conceptions of evaluation and grading. During an interview with the writer, Professor Doug Foley (The University of Texas at Austin) mused aloud about instructor bias: "I really see teaching as...to some extent...making explicit what your point of view is and then teaching it intelligently. And so the question of instructor bias...I don't worry about getting myself out of the instructional process...I suppose I'm fearful that I'm subjective at my grading - like anybody else - because I really think it's impossible to objectively grade anything, but...you can set it where people are dealing with points of view - philosophical...or theoretical - that are in a formal body of literature, I think you're not asking them to do more than understand points of view...[and] they've either mastered that or they haven't."

8. See Chansky (1962) and Sawin, 1969.

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